

He poured the diesel into the bottle, attached the cap and lit the string. “Toda la noche va a quemar” he said proudly. Two minutes later the lamp went out. Mario assured us that it was only because the string wasn’t cotton. So he tore off a piece from the bottom of his cotton shirt and pushed it through the bottle cap. This time the lamp stayed lighted for less than ten seconds. Frustrated, Mario took off his shirt, reads the label and announced that the shirt was in fact only 50% cotton. He left the lamp and went searching for something in his pack. “Eso!” he said as he cut a strip off a piece of his pants and went through the same routine with his ketchup bottle lamp. This time the lamp probably could have stayed lighted for the entire night but soon it was already time for bed. I blew out Mario’s lamp which had successfully stayed lighted for 10 minutes and wished everyone a good night.

We woke up at dawn the next day in hopes of getting far enough up the mountain to establish a good base camp. We ate some Ecuadorian oatmeal soup and felt ready for some hard hiking. The sun was out and the day looked promising. Two cloud forest Morpho butterflies were fluttering rainbow colors in the distance, weaving in and out of each other’s paths. The upper sides of their wings were light blue and the undersides are orange and yellow. Every beat of their wings revealed flashes of the contrasting colors. They seemed unreal —almost magical, disappearing and reappearing out of thin air flashing

their magnificent colors. On our way up we passed pastures inhabited by some cows. Lou had warned us about the three dangers during our training. One was getting lost, the second was the machetes Mario and Alí were using and lastly the charge of a ‘man-eating’ bull. He told us about how he once hiked up to a high pasture where unfriendly bull lived. The bull got mad at Lou and angrily chased him up a tree. “They keep the meaner ones up high where they think no one will pass” he said. With Lou’s admonition echoing in my head, I tried hard to slip by the cows quickly in hopes that I would go unnoticed. The problem was that the cows were within a couple of feet of where we needed to pass. My plan of going unnoticed was impossible. They saw me as soon as I came within ten feet of them and surely enough the three closest to me came trotting in my direction. Fear raced through my body and I broke into a sprint up the pasture. Surprised by my sudden burst of energy, the porters ahead of me stopped and tried to figure out what was happening. “They just want salt from you” Andy chuckled. By the time I was at higher ground, safely hidden from the man-eating cows, the porters were hysterically laughing at me, assuring me that there was nothing to be afraid of- these were cows not bulls.

On the way up I observed more fauna that existed in the area. I saw wildly colored insects and birds such as the Cloud forest ‘pavo’ and the Sparkling Violetear

hummingbird. Other more exotic animals that inhabit these areas are Andean tapirs, pumas, and the Spectacled bear. Unlike the Morpho butterflies or the cows, these large mammals are shy and reclusive. We were only lucky enough to see traces of their presence. We noticed a couple of areas with Tapir feces, a couple of trees with puma and bear claw marks and traces of footprints here and there.

At midday we got up to 2700m and found an appropriate campsite on a ridge where there was enough wind to fight off most of the blood sucking insects (and there are many- zancudos, aranillas, tabanos, mosquitos just to name a few) and enough running water nearby to last us the week. Mario and Alí quickly cleared the area of vegetation to set up our tents and a tarp above our cooking and ‘office’ area. We found Cyclanthaceae leaves to line the ground where our tent would be. The Cyclanthaceae leaves not only pad the hard ground but also prevent the condensation on the underside of our tent. I piled the vegetation Mario and Alí cleared for our tent up and made myself a work table and a studio with stuff sacks blocking the winds and light green leaves as background- the best substitute I could find for an 18% grey backdrop. We had a hearty lunch of peanuts, bread, cheese and chocolate under our newly constructed lab cum kitchen area. After our meal the porters took off to cut some more of the trail up to Cerro Negro. Andy and I stayed behind setting up our